

FALL 2007

Our Country Home

A RIVER REPORTER MAGAZINE



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NORTH
BRANCH**

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Branch Inn reborn**

Modular Housing

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A Country Home Away from Home

The Old North Branch Inn reborn

By DOROTHY HARTZ

All that and more has recently resuscitated a historic structure in bucolic western Sullivan County, **The Old North Branch Inn**. The emphasis is on “old,” for the current owner’s proud insistence on preservation wherever possible, and even, it seems, impossible. “We should all look this good after 150 years,” she says of the original wood floor, smooth as satin after reclamation from decades of tarpaper and carpet.



Lesser's living area in The Old North Branch Inn prior to renovation (above) and after renovation (below).

Contributed photos



Victoria Lesser is making local history, not only by adding her name to a list of innkeepers—Spafford, Schlichting, Hoffman, among others, leading back to the building’s construction in 1868—but by assuring the continuity of history through her gift of new life for the landmark Main Street building, last open to the public in the early 1980s.

The new Old North Branch Inn is now in business, housing a visitors’ B & B, but also providing a neighborhood destination in Baxter’s Juice Bar and Café, where folks can linger over morning newspapers and coffee (organic, brewed in a French press), or where kids can gather after school to do homework over a snack. A large wooden table encourages community, as does a plump circular sofa and, in good weather, the front porch, but quiet nooks for reading are also available. Lesser is considering hosting movie and game nights, and she is open to other suggestions from the public. More formal, catered events such as weddings and private parties can be arranged, given the professional kitchen, and, for the future, an old pool is being

revised as a covered, rain-or-shine farm market. For the present, local vendors already dominate the café’s offerings—pastries by Flour Power and Little Miss Muffin, and light hot fare from Pika’s Quiches. Ziggy’s Dog Treats are also available, endorsed by the pets with whom Lesser shares her apartment on the premises—pub Baxter, for whom the juice bar is named, and Roxie, an inquisitive Great Dane.

An open house in August allowed visitors to preview the accommodations, browse for antiques in the still functional two-lane, hand-set bowling alley and sample the pastries in the café, which boasts both a gorgeous deco bar from the 1939 World’s Fair and high speed internet. Original accoutrements and memorabilia speed connection to the past as well, to an era when the inn, complete with barbershop, was a centerpiece of North Branch’s quiet but flourishing hospitality trade. Upstairs, the four guest rooms, all with spacious private baths, are beautifully and sometimes whimsically appointed with vintage finds from local antique dealers and artisans, as well as with art and

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The Old North Branch Inn, North Branch, NY

Contributed photos



The view down the bowling lanes, now appointed with antiques.



The Inn has four fully furnished guest bedrooms, each with a private bath.

“Some people just assumed the building would be taken down, but how could I do that? Handmade nails. Hand-hewn timber. I’m preserving it for North Branch. People who came here to the barbershop or the bar or bowling alley can bring their grandchildren, and now they can have memories, too. It’s my investment in learning how to live a good life.”

—Victoria Lesser

mentos from the proprietor’s colorful other life. Lesser relocated to Sullivan County in 2004 from Key West, FL, where, over a period of 30 years, she turned a small leather business into a fast track career as a clothing and interior stylist. Although she has no formal training in design, she does have a pedigree. One ancestor worked for Christian Dior and one was a tailor for Nicholas II, the last czar of Russia. When it’s time to work, Lesser imagines her grandfather’s hands cutting fabric. This act of homage has helped her to create celebrity garb—Bill Cosby’s silk pajamas, the very same ones we’ve seen on The Cosby Show, and Bee Gee Maurice Gibb’s boots, fashioned from originals worn by John Lennon. She has also designed for country music’s Barbara Mandrell and Aerosmith’s Steven Tyler and, locally, for the ongoing renovation of Roscoe’s Antrim Lodge. Prior to renovating the Old North Branch Inn, she purchased and refurbished two smaller houses in the county. Lesser’s attachment to the area grew out of childhood summers spent in Loch Sheldrake, NY with her family, student life in 1967 at a brand new Sullivan County Community College and, later, her young son’s enthusiasm for Camp Swago in nearby Damascus, PA. When life in the fast lane as a celebrity stylist took its toll and a changing Key West no longer provided the sense of community she’d once enjoyed, it was time to turn to the simple life, and Sullivan County called her home.

Restoration of buildings has also meant restoration of Victoria Lesser’s spirit. Her daily wish for “patience, understanding and tolerance,” as well as her appetite for hard physical labor, have been served with countless opportunities, as anyone who has ever picked up a hammer could attest. “I laughed when a neighborhood kid asked if I was retired,” she recalls. She welcomes visitors of all ages to drop in to see her results and especially old-timers to share their stories. “I’ve been given this talent to use in the service of restoration. I love being here, and I hope to be an inspiration to others, who maybe think they can’t do it.” When Lesser bought the building, the only draw to Main Street was the post office. Today, she is

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hopeful that, given commitment and investment in local networking, the hamlet of North Branch could enjoy a revival of its glory days, many of which, at least in autumn, centered around the cider mill, a fragrant feature of rural heritage popular with locals and tourists alike, no longer in operation. Lesser's faith in the possible comes from her own experience. "In order for the inn to retain its value, I have to be the business. I have to live here. So here I am, selling coffee and inviting strangers into my house. And by restoring instead of tearing down, I'm honoring all the people who worked on it in the past. I'm keeping their memory alive."

Indeed she is. Throughout this project and others, Lesser has employed exclusively local craftsmen, most of whom have personal associations with the sites where they work. Callicoon carpenter Teb Fink, for instance, found his grandfather's and uncle's names written on a wall during renovation of one of Lesser's other houses. A thread of connection runs to this reporter as well. My mother, a Jersey girl, vacationed in North Branch in the late 1930s and early '40s, first meeting my father at the Hortonville

Firemen's Field Day while staying at "Mrs. Carroll's" in North Branch. I've forgotten the exact location of that particular boarding house, but, growing up, I would picture my parents dropping in to the big old inn in the middle of Main Street, easing into their courtship over his beer and her ginger ale. Now, more than 60 years later, I see them more vividly than ever, thanks to Victoria Lesser. "I'm rewarded when locals call or visit to thank me for what I'm doing," she says. "Some people just assumed the building would be taken down, but how could I do that? Handmade nails. Hand-hewn timber. I'm preserving it for North Branch. People who came here to the barbershop or the bar or bowling alley can bring their grandchildren, and now they can have memories, too. It's my investment in learning how to live a good life."

The Old North Branch Inn is located at 869 North Branch Road, North Branch, NY 12766, approximately 15 minutes from Bethel Woods Center for the Arts and minutes from the recreational Upper Delaware River. Visit www.theoldnorthbranchinn.com or call 845/482-5925.



The guest rooms are furnished with antiques and whimsical touches.

Contributed photos



Victoria Lesser, with Baxter and Roxie, relax in the lounge area of Baxter's Juice Bar and Café.